Performance Indicators and Policy Cycles: On Paradoxical Longevity of Management Buzzwords in Japan's Higher Education Reform[1]

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Introduction: The SGU Program, Ten Years Later

2023 was the last (fiscal) year of a ten-year governmental funding scheme called the Super Global Universities Grants Program (SGU).[2] When the idea of the grants program was first presented at a meeting of the Education Rebuilding Implementation Council in 2013, it was announced as follows:

> …[T]he government will provide intensive funding for “Super Global Universities” (tentative name), which will actively employ foreign faculty members, collaborate with overseas universities, and expand degree programs that allow students to graduate by taking courses only in English. The government will also promote international joint research and increase the international presence of Japanese universities by having *more than ten universities ranked in the top 100 in the world university rankings in the next ten years.* [italics added] (Council for the Implementation of Education Rebuilding, 2013) https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/shisetu/029/attach/1338022.htm

1 The first part of this essay is largely based on the arguments in Sato (2019, 2020a, 2020b).

2 The official Japanese name of the grants program is *Suupaa Gurobaru Daigaku Sosei Shien Jigyo* which can be translated as “Projects for the Support of the Creation of Super Global Universities.” While the official English name for the grants program is “Top Global University Japan” (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science [JSPS] https://www.jsps.go.jp/j-sgu/index.html), the JSPS, which is responsible for the implementation of the grants program, and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Science (MEXT), in most cases, have used the word *Suupaa Gurobaru Daigaku* and its acronym SGU instead of Top Global University or TGU in their official documents.

As stated in the above document, one of the major goals of the SGU was to improve Japanese universities' standing in international university rankings. Accordingly, when the application documents for the SGU was made public in 2014, one of the two categories of the recipient universities was said to be "Top Type Universities" or higher education onstitutions (HEIs) who "have the potential of achieving the ranks within the top 100 in world university rankings."[3]

While the grants program's term has not yet concluded at the time of writing this essay, it is highly unlikely that the program will attain this (over-)ambitious goal.

Table 1 A KPI for SGU: Ranks of Japan's "Top Type Universities"

	THE*			QS**		
	2015	2024		2015	2024	
Univ of Tokyo	23	**29**		31	**28**	†
Kyoto Univ	59	**55**	†	36	**46**	
Tokyo Inst Tech	141	**191**		68	**91**	
Osaka Univ	157	**175**		55	**80**	
Tohoku Univ	165	**130**	†	71	**113**	
Nagoya Univ	226-250	**201-250**	†	103	**176**	
TMDU***	276-300	**401-501**		294	**611-620**	
Univ of Tsukuba	301-350	**351-400**		198	**355**	
Hokkaido Univ	351-400	**351-400**		135	**196**	
Kyushu Univ	351-400	**301-350**	†	126	**164**	
Waseda Univ	351-400	**501-1000**		220	**199**	†
Keio Univ	No entry	**601-800**		197	**214**	
Hiroshima Univ	No entry	**601-800**		314	**472**	

*THE = Times Higher Education World University Rankings, **QS = QS World University Rankings, ***TMDU = Tokyo Medical and Dental University, †: Universities whose ranks in 2023 improved than those in 2014
Sources: THE website (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2024/world-ranking), QS Website (https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2024/world-ranking)

Table 1 shows the ranks of 13 top type universities in 2014 and 2023 in the two major world university rankings: the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (THE) and the QS World University Rankings (QS). In both cases, rankings are published in the preceding year: for example, THE 2024 was actually published in September of 2023. As can be seen in this table, only two universities, i.e., the University of Tokyo and Kyoto University, still remain in the top 100 in the THE 2024. While the situation was somewhat better with QS, the number of universities ranked within the top 100 was less than five in QS 2024. To

3 The other category was "global traction type universities," or those universities that are expected to show leadership in globalizing Japanese society.

make matters worse, the ranks of almost all 13 “top type universities” in the two league tables have dropped during the last ten years, except for the six universities marked by a dagger (†).

It seems somehow strange, therefore, that an assessment report of SGU issued by the JSPS in March of 2023 did not pay even cursory attention to these rather disappointing results regarding the overall rankings of top type universities (JSPS 2023). Indeed, there is only one reference to the THE World University Rankings in the report, which addresses the “improvements” in the scores regarding the “international outlook” of the recipient universities of the SGU. These scores consist of the proportion of international students, the proportion of international academic staff, and the frequency of international co-authorship. The report quoted the following sentence included in an article related to THE Japan University Rankings:

> It is obvious that Japan still has a number of world-leading research universities. As the results of the SGU show, Japanese universities will keep their top-level statuses if the Japanese government continues its investment in higher education based on explicit strategies (JSPS 2023: 4).[4]

This disregard of the positions in the world university rankings looks quite strange since the rankings were treated one of the most crucial key performance indicators (KPIs) in the grants program, as well as in numerous education reform plans. As will be discussed shortly, KPI is a term that was imported from the business world to the higher education sector at some time in early 2000s. However, it is hard to imagine in the business world that some KPIs that were not achieved would be ignored. Besides KPI, one can find many examples of the use of business-related terms in the policy documents addressing higher education reform in Japan, including plan-do-check-action (PDCA), decision tree, governance, SWOT analysis, and strategy. While the terms and related management ideas are introduced as a sort of panacea, scrutiny of the usage of the terms often reveals certain anomalies and even apparent misuses. This essay addresses the cases of KPI and PDCA as typical examples of such use and misuse of business-related terms or “management speak” in Japan’s higher education reform.

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4 See also the website of THE Japan University Rankings 2022 (https://japanuniversitiyranking.jp/topics/00202/index.html). For some reason, I could not find an equivalent commentary in the English version of *THE World University Rankings 2022* (Times Higher Education 2021).

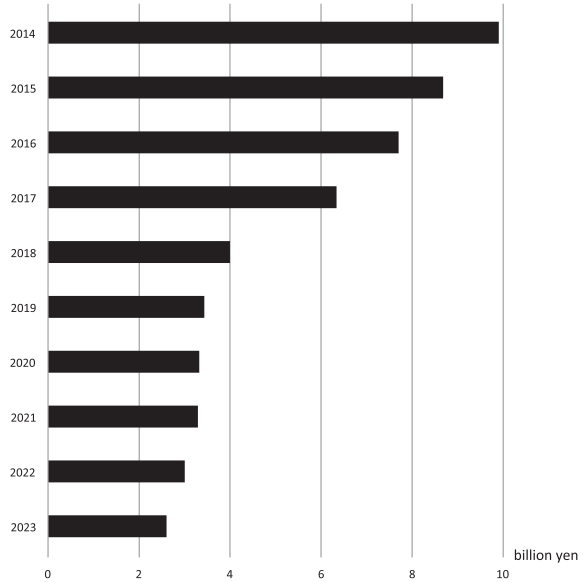
Ⅰ “Strategic” Reform Policies?

Many faculty and staff members at Japanese universities, especially those at “top type universities,” may find it quite ironic that the assessment report on SGU refers to “explicit strategies” in characterizing the Japanese government’s investment in the higher education sector. In fact, it appears that what is most lacking in many, if not most, higher education reform policies is a clear and consistent strategy (Sato 2020a, 2020b).

SGU is one of the grant programs that is based on the idea of “selectivity and concentration” aimed at creating centers of excellence in research and/or education. Yet, as we detailed elsewhere (Sato et al. 2018; Sato 2019), the actual amounts of grants allocated to the recipient universities were too small to create and maintain centers of excellence. In some cases, the recipient universities could get only one fourth or even one fifth of the amount that they requested on their application forms. Above all, the relatively large number of recipients, (i.e., 37, including 24 “global traction type universities” and 13 top type universities), itself belies the word “selectivity.”

To make matters worse, as shown in Fig. 1, the total amount of grants has decreased rapidly during the last ten years.

Fig. 1 Grants for SGU: 2014-2023



Sources: Created by the Author based on MEXT (n.d.)

While approximately 9.9 billion yen in grants were issued in 2014, only 2.2 billion yen

were awarded in 2023: the total amount of grants became about one fourth of the amount issued in 2014. With the decrease in the grant budget, most recipient universities have had to make ends meet with the grant money actually allocated to them. Consequently they have faced tremendous difficulties maintaining specific projects intended to "internationalize" education and research. The universities have also had a hard time retaining faculty members who were hired as researchers and/or teachers specifically for the purpose of, in a sense, "super-globalizing" their universities. These facts attest to the impression that, for most universities, the SGU program made it difficult to formulate and implement any "explicit strategy."

The situation is similar with the other centers of excellence (COE) type funding initiated by the Japanese government. The Center for Research and Development Strategy, an agent under the jurisdiction of MEXT published a report in 2017, titled *Towards Optimal Development of Centers of Excellence in Japan: For the Formation of Sustainable Strength of Organization and Realization of Innovation.* Through detailed examination of the durations and the number of recipients of various COE-type funding programs, the report's authors candidly admitted that such grants programs tend to lack mutual coordination, and are often fragmentary, piecemeal, and short-lived (Center of Research and Development Strategy 2017: i).

Part of the executive summary of the report states:

> [A]s a result of the unsystematic ways in which various projects aimed at creating new centers have been developed one after another, various problems have emerged. Major problems include the following: *host institutions' difficulty in formulating long-term strategic planning about the centers* have resulted in the exhaustion of the host institutions themselves; the concentration of centers at a limited number of universities has led to a disparity in the educational and research environment among Japanese universities; and it is becoming increasingly difficult to ensure diversity due to restrictions on supporting a wide range of educational and research fields. Furthermore, in some cases, centers end up having ambiguous positions in their host institutions because after the projects' terms end, the centers cannot continue to hire and cultivate staff members and improve organizational infrastructure: consequently, their activities for promoting advanced education and research have stagnated considerably [italics added]. (Center of Research and Development Strategy 2017: ii).[5]

5 The following is a (verbatim) quote from the executive summary of the report written in English: "[T]hese programs aiming at the new center foundation have built in an unsystematic manner, some issues raise by the ↗

While the above paragraph mostly refers to the difficulties or problems formulating an "explicit strategy" about the future of centers of excellence, in the case of SGU, the problem is not limited to specific research centers because most recipient universities have had to allocate internal financial and personnel resources to make up for the decreasing grant funds. The financial and human resource problems have, in fact, posed serious difficulties in formulating a long-term and comprehensive strategy at each university.

Ⅱ KPI and PDCA in *Japan Revitalization Strategy*

The term "strategy" is also found in another document, titled *Japan Revitalization Strategy: JAPAN is BACK* (Cabinet Secretariat 2013). This document was a sort of government manifesto that was issued shortly after former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe took office in December 2012. It was revised in three consecutive years from 2014 to 2016. In the English version of the document published in 2013, the following phrase appeared as the top item related to "Developing Japan's young people into globally competitive human resources." The following sentences follow the title:

> Unlocking the full potential of universities (e.g., reform of national universities)
> Target:
> Place more than ten Japanese universities in rank in top 100 world university rankings in the next 10 years (Cabinet Secretariat 2013: 22)

The term "target" in the above quote was replaced by "KPI(s)" in the revised revitalization strategy that was issued in 2014 (KPIs here refers to the indicators used to gauge the extent to which certain important policy targets are achieved. For a more detailed explanation of KPI in policy documents, see Sato 2020a: 21-23). The 2014 version of *Japan Revitalization Strategy* refers to KPI profusely: While the term appeared only four times in the previous 2013 version, it occurs 107 times in the 2014 version. It is also noteworthy that in the series of *Revitalization Strategy* the term KPI is supposed to be tightly coupled with PDCA (Plan-Do-

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↘ various shapes. Mainly, there are the difficulty of the long-term strategy planning, the differential of the educational research environment according to the tendency to reward large-scale strong institutions, and restriction of a wide educational research field. In addition, sustainability issues are lying after the financing period" (Center of Research and Development Strategy 2017: ii). I have translated the executive summary in Japanese into English because the original English summary appears has several sentences that are difficult to understand.

Check-Act[ion]), another term borrowed from the business world referring to a sort of so-called “management cycle” (For a more detailed explanation of PDCA, see Sato 2020a: 12-19).

The following paragraphs, taken from the English version of the *Japan Revitalization Strategy,* are a typical example of the combination of the two terms. Under the section entitled “An Evolving Growth Strategy,” the following is stated:

> (1) Implementing the PDCA cycle by reviewing targets (KPIs)
>
> This Growth Strategy presents “targets” (*KPIs*) that should be achieved for each set of major policies. “Targets” including indicators identified by international organizations, are established to enable objective, routine, and comprehensive evaluation of policy outcomes, including through international comparisons.
>
> Furthermore, the individual measures necessary to realize the “targets” show a clear direction, methodology, and implementation period. As many of these individual measures will require detailed designs, amendment of law, budget requests, tax system reforms, and other procedures for implementation, *the existing bottom up PDCA cycle* will need to be applied to monitor the progress of individual measures [gauging the degree of target achievements] [italics added] (Cabinet Secretariat 2013: 11).

In the paragraph following the above quote, it is further stated that while PDCA is a bottom-up process, it should be combined with “top-down approach” through “target review” which consists of the following items:

> 1. Were the stated “targets” achieved; 2. If not, what was lacking; 3. What are the problems with the existing measures; and 4. What should be improved, including the abandonment of ineffective measures (Cabinet Secretariat 2013: 11).

From the above description, it appears that the novelty of “An Evolving Growth Strategy” can be found in the combination of the “existing bottom up PDCA cycle” with a target review, which has a “top-down approach.” However, there is no further explanation concerning the relationship between KPI and PDCA either in the 2013 or 2014 version of *Japan Revitalization Strategy.* Therefore, we can find almost no clues as to why the author(s) of the documents regarded PDCA as a “bottom-up” procedure. As I have explained elsewhere (Sato 2019: 182; 2020a: 23), PDCA is a rather “top-down” approach since most of the plans (＝P)

are imposed upon universities by the government.

In any case, after the term KPI was featured prominently in the *Japan Revitalization Strategy,* KPI and PDCA appeared frequently in various policy documents as twin keywords or “twin buzzwords.”

Ⅲ The Exceptional Longevity of PDCA and KPI

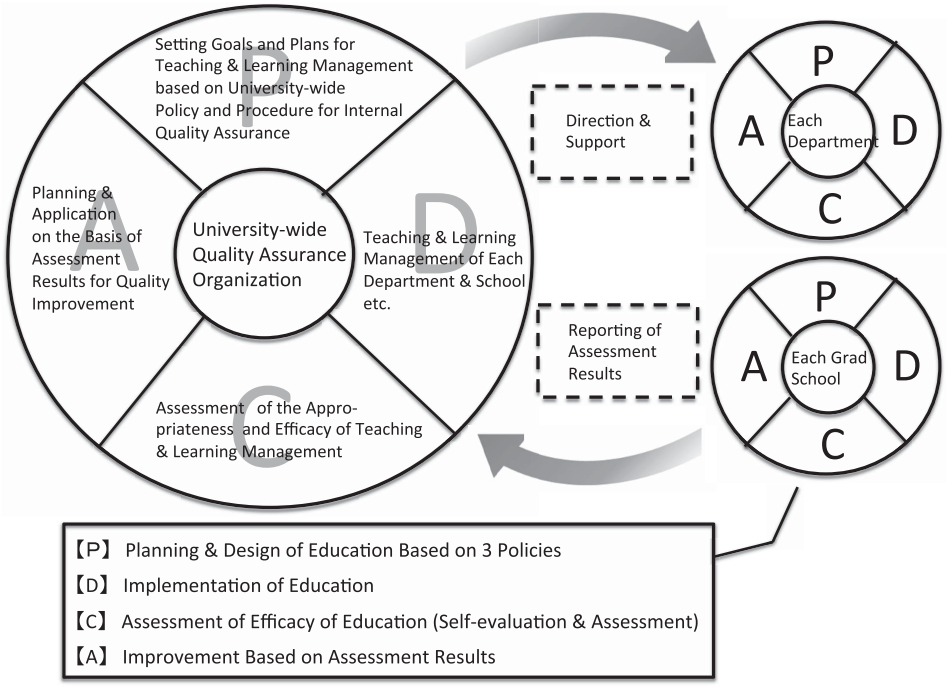
Robert Birnbaum was a higher education researcher who also served as vice chancellor and chancellor at several American universities. Partly based on his own experiences, Birnbaum, in his *Management Fads in Higher Education* (2000), traced the trajectories of a number of managerial ideas imported from the business sector to the higher education sector. The ideas examined by Birnbaum include, among others, zero-base-budgeting, management by objectives, and total quality management, which he argues are essentially management fads and business buzzwords, showing a similar lifecycle both in the non-academic (business) sector and academic sector. The lifecycle begins with initial enthusiasm and sector-wide diffusion but often ends in disillusionment and eventual abandonment. In other words, such management ideas are destined to fade away after each of their “sell-by dates” expires. Moreover, with the creation of another new idea, the same pattern is repeated. The only significant difference between the two sectors is that a management idea tends to be imported from the business sector into the higher education sector after a certain time lag. Therefore, it often happens that an idea that has become already obsolete in the business sector is imported into the higher education as a novel insight and hailed as a fantastic policy measure.

The “product lives” of the management fads studied by Birnbaum are no longer than 15 years. Therefore, if Birnbaum’s model fits also with PDCA and KPI, it is likely that they are now in the final stage of their lifecycles as management fads in Japan’s higher education sector. As for PDCA, it has at least 15 years of history, starting from the time the term was first mentioned in a report issued by the Central Education Council in 2008 and denoted as key to the improvement of university education. On the other hand, KPI dates to 2013 when the term was included in the *Japan Revitalization Strategy* as one of the most effective ideas for enacting wholesale administrative reform at the national level. Considering the lengths of their usages as well as the questionable utilities of PDCA and KPI, it appears strange that one can still find these two terms frequently, not only in the documents related to educational reform but also in the more general policy discourses on administrative reforms. In other words, it appears that their “sell-by dates” have not yet expired.

1. PDCA's Longevity

For example, the Japan University Accreditation Association (JUAA) has consistently emphasized PDCA's importance for internal quality assurance of education at each university. In its *University Evaluation Handbook* published in 2022, the term "PDCA cycle" is used 17 times. Fig. 2 is a pictorial presentation from a section of the handbook titled "Clarification of Education-Related Policies and Their Organic Integration with PDCA Cycle" (JUAA 2022: 7).

Fig. 2 Three PDCA cycles in JUAA's *Handbook*



Source: Created by the Author Based on JUAA (2022: 7)

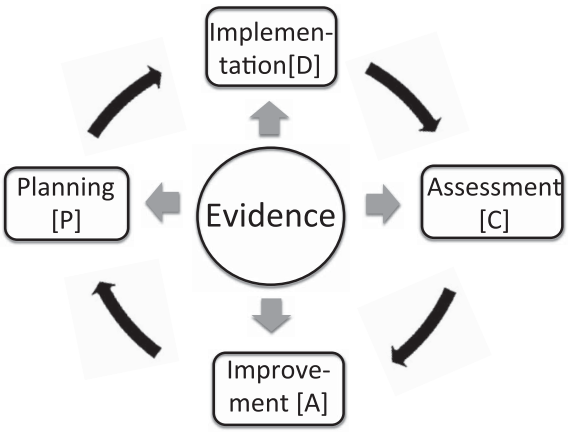
The title of the figure can be translated as "Image of the system for internal quality assurance led by the university-wide committee for promoting internal quality assurance." As is often the case with this kind of figure (Sato 2019: Ch.2), only a vague "image" is provided, and there are few detailed explanations about the content of the figure in the *Handbook.* Notwithstanding the vagueness of the role of the cyclical process in the quality assurance of teaching and learning at HEIs, there are frequent references to PDCA or the "PDCA cycle" in numerous documents issued by the universities accredited by the JUAA. For example, a self-assessment report of T University (pseudonym) features the PDCA cycle prominently as an essential requirement for the internal quality assurance of almost every aspect of its organizational activities. The committee responsible for the accreditation also requested all departments to examine whether their activities are being carried out in accordance with the

spirit of PDCA.

At a more general level, the Cabinet Office of the Japanese government has also frequently used the PDCA cycle as *the* key to effective implementation of evidence-based policy making (EBPM) for administrative reform of government agencies across the board. The Office published the *EBPM Guidebook* in November of 2022, intended for "those in charge of policy making and implementation," in which PDCA cycle appears nine times. However, although the title of the document includes the term "guidebook," it is nothing but a compilation of PowerPoint-style slides, each of which consists of rather dubious drawings and bulleted items.

Fig. 3 is one of such sketchy drawings illustrating the (ideal) relationship between PDCA and EBPM.[6]

Fig. 3　Relationship between PDCA and EBPM



Source: Created by the Author Based on Cabinet Office (2022)

In the guidebook, only the following sentence is provided as the explanation for the figure:

> "Dynamic EBPM" refers to the EBPM that rotate policy cycle (PDCA) in the way in which a policy can be made and modified flexibly aiming at maximizing the effectiveness of policy measures. We should also take care not to make evaluations, analyses, or re-evaluation ends in themselves (Cabinet Office 2022: 18-19).

Neither further explanation nor clues are provided concerning specific ways in which "dynamic EBPM" can be attained. As the figure and the above explanation merely emphasize the importance of some "evidence" in each phase (or step) of PDCA, they are nothing but commonsensical or even banal accounts about policy making and implementation. Still, catchy

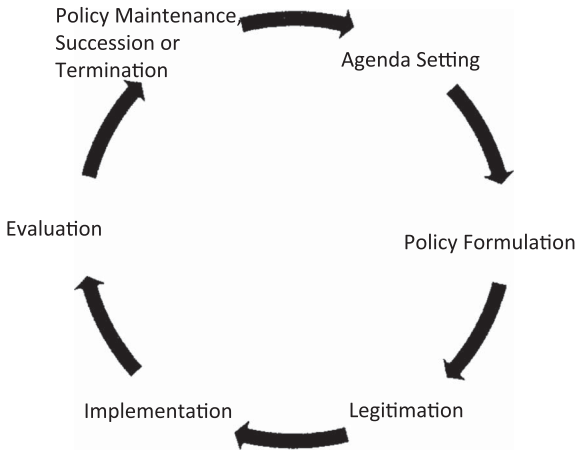
6　The four alphabets (P, D, C, A) were added by the author.

acronyms such as PDCA and EBPM may serve as effective props to make the policy making process appear quite tidy and ordered, at least until such acronyms' sell-by dates expire.

2. Possible Reasons behind PDCA's Longevity

The longevity of the PDCA (cycle) could be partly explained in terms of its being a convenient prop for making a certain reform policy appear to have been crafted and implemented in an orderly manner. As Paul Cairney points out in his book, *The Politics of Evidence-Based Policy Making* (2016), one can frequently find a similar "policy cycle" in the literature on public policy, as shown in Fig. 4.

Fig. 4 A Generic Policy Cycle

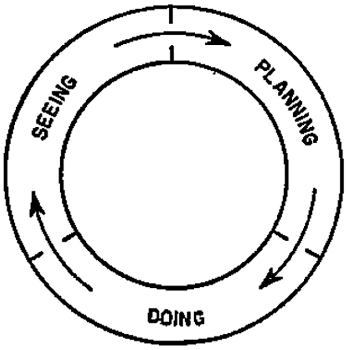


Source: Cairney (2016: 18)

However, in most cases, a policy or management cycle is "a misleadingly simple description of how policy is made" (Cairney 2016: 17) in the real world. In fact, the actual policy and management processes are far messier than one can imagine from the cyclical figure. Still, such a cyclical image is popular "partly because it is a simple model that can be understood by non-specialists" (Cairney 2016: 17).

Sometimes, even specialists who often confront and are, for that matter, knowledgeable about the inherently messy aspects of their day-to-day activities yearn to describe and prescribe their jobs in an orderly way, as can be seen in the prototypical image of management cycle in Alvin Brown's so-called "PDS cycle" or "Planning-Doing-Seeing" cycle (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5　PDS Cycle

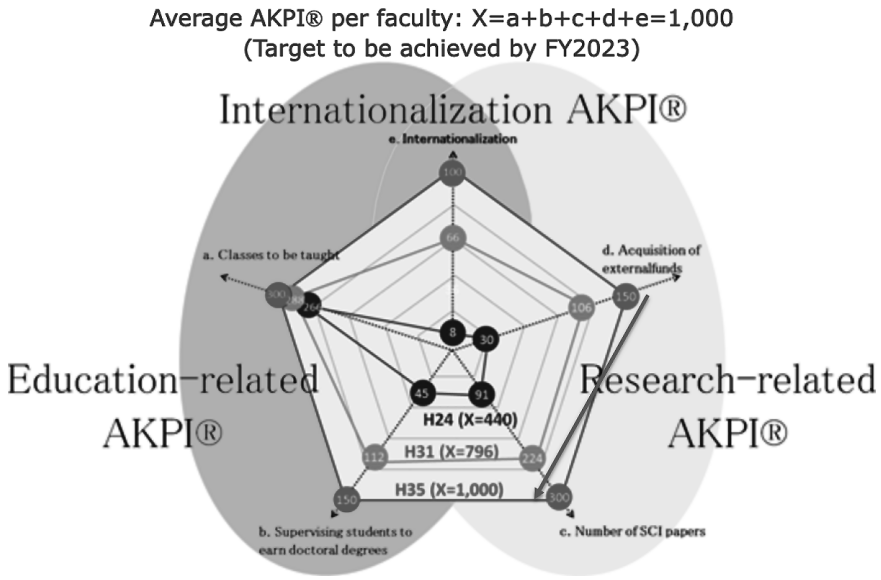


Source: Brown (1947: 209)

3. KPI's Longevity

As for KPI, Hiroshima University provides an interesting example, because the university has used it extensively over the last ten years. Hiroshima University even developed an original indicator, "AKPI" (an acronym of "achievement-motivated key performance indicator"), and registered it as a trademark. The indicator is intended to measure each faculty member's achievements or performances in five dimensions: (a) classroom teaching, (b) graduate advisement, (c) Web of Science indexed articles, (d) external funding, and (e) internationalization. The score is calculated for each faculty member as the total of the subscores of the five dimensions, and the score is sometimes presented in the manner of a radar chart, as shown in Fig. 6.

Fig. 6　Hiroshima University' AKPI



Source: Hiroshima University Website (https://www.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/en/sgu/page02_02)

The above figure shows that the average AKPI score was 440 in 2012. At that time, it was expected that it would reach 796 in 2019, and eventually 1,000 in 2023. According to various documents issued by Hiroshima University, if the average AKPI score reaches 1,000, the university would rank in the top 100 universities in the world university rankings: Hiroshima University was one of the universities chosen as the Top Type Universities in the Super Global University Grants Program.[7]

In the application document for the SGU grants program, the term "KPI" is used extensively, appearing 40 times in the 80-page document.[8] Shortly after Hiroshima University became one of the recipients of the SGU grant, the university's website proclaimed:

> Hiroshima University's goal is to become one of the world's top 100 universities within the next ten years and to be able to properly allocate resources to produce the best results in terms of both research and education as a university. The University has established its own Achievement-motivated Key Performance Indicators (AKPI®) to clarify the steps that need to be taken to achieve this goal (Hiroshima University's Website (https://www.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/en/sgu/page02_02)).[9]

Hiroshima University later developed another KPI as its unique performance indicator to gauge faculty members' contributions that are not fully covered by AKPI, including such items as books published, contribution toward university administration, and social services (Yamashita 2016: 209). This new KPI, called Basic Effort Key Performance Indicator, or BKPI, was registered as a trademark in 2016, in the same year as AKPI. The university further developed Common Key Performance Indicator, or CKPI, to facilitate inter-university collaboration in, for example, cross-appointment of faculty members among five neighboring universities. CKPI was registered as a trademark in 2021.

While Hiroshima University's case is exceptional regarding the extensive use of performance indicators, other universities, especially national instituttions, have their own

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7 Hiroshima University was also one of the recipients that received a disappointing grant amount: the university was allocated only appproximately 126 million yen in 2015, which is less than one quarter of the requested application amount.

8 The second most frequent use of the term KPI was in Tohoku University's application form, in which the term appeared ten times, followed by Shibaura Institute of Technology (six times), Sophia University (once), and Okayama University (once). None of the application forms of the other 31 recipient universities included the term KPI.

9 As shown in Table 1, Hiroshima University was ranked in the 601st and 800th range in the THE World University Rankings 2024. In the QS World Univ Rankings 2024, it was ranked 472nd.

reasons to be attentive in constructing KPIs of some sort due to MEXT's policy.[10] During the Third Mid-term Objectives Period (2016-2021), the MEXT emphasized the degree of achievement of KPIs at each university in the ministry's decision to differentially allocate block grants. The MEXT also referred to the progress of KPIs in assessing "the achievement level of national universities' strategic goals in view of facilitating the PDCA cycle aimed at further development of universities" (MEXT 2020: 2).

4. Possible Reasons behind KPI's Longevity

While the adoption of some sort of performance indicator, whether it is called KPI or not, into public policy for research and education is a relatively new development in Japan, the use of numerical performance information has been around for more than 40 years in other countries, especially in western nations. For example, in the case of the UK, the explicit introduction of performance indicators began in the mid-1980s. In relation to this trend, Marin Cave and others commented in *The Use of Performance Indicators in Higher Education* (1988) as follows:

> [The UK] Government determined to bring to bear on higher education *the principles it was seeking to install across the public sector*: strong central direction; accountability for the economic, efficient and effective use of public money; the measurement of performance against outcome criteria and the *substitution of the concepts and methods of management for those of administration or professionalism.* University leaders and other elite academics, realizing the strength of the Government's determination to impose new and explicit terms of its own choosing on the erstwhile predominantly implicit exchange relationship between the state and universities, strove to pre-empt or reshape government initiatives where it could not avoid them. At stake were issues of institutional autonomy, governance and control of the aims, objectives and evaluative criteria and mechanisms of higher education [italics added] (Cave et al. 1988: 3).

The above quote suggests a number of important reasons underlying the longevity of KPI or the use of similar performance indicators in higher education, most of which are closely related to so-called "New Public Management" or NPM (Sato et al. 2019: 375-379), generally

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10 For example, K University [pseudonym] introduced KPI in 2022 as a trial, and the actual scores were published this year, only as internal information. Different from Hiroshima University, KPI scores are calculated at the department level, not at the level of individual staff member.

referring to the practices that have been adopted at public administrative agencies in such countries as the UK and New Zealand since the late 1970s. While there are various definitions of NPM, it is generally understood as the "theory or doctrine that the public sector can be improved by the importation of business concepts, techniques, and values" (Pollitt and Bourckaert 2011: 10).

According to Pollitt and Bourckaert, NPM is also a group of specific concepts and practices that include the following:

- greater emphasis on "performance," especially through the measurement of outputs
- a preference for lean, flat, small, specialized (disaggregated) organizational forms over large, multi-functional forms
- a widespread substitution of contracts for hierarchical relations as the principal coordinating device
- a widespread injection of market-type mechanisms (MTMs) including competitive tendering, public sector league tables, and performance-related pay
- an emphasis on treating service users as "customers" and on the application of generic quality improvement techniques such as Total Quality Management (TQM) (Pollitt and Bourckaert 2011: 10; See also Pollitt 2003: 27-32)

As can be seen from the items listed above (e.g., lean and flat organizational form, market-type mechanisms and TQM), NPM is closely related to "management speak," while specific names and catchphrases for the practices have changed over time. It should be also noted here that Pollitt and Bourckaert mention measurement of output performance as the top item in the above list. The uppermost importance of performance measurement in numerical indicators in NPM is, in large part, based on the deep-seated public distrust of expert judgments of those in charge of public services (Muller 2018: 39-44, 51-57). Moreover, as Michael Power argues in his highly influential book *Audit Society: Rituals of Verification* (1997), such widespread distrust in the "capacity of teachers, social workers, and university lecturers to self-regulate the quality of their services" (Power 1997: 135) has led to an "audit explosion," or the situation in which "[a]udit has assumed the status of an all purpose solution to problems of administrative control" (Power 1994: 47).

It should be also noted that distrust of expert judgements, which are based on seemingly esoteric knowledge and therefore cannot be easily understood by non-experts, has been a driving force behind the audit explosion. It is also noteworthy that audit explosion and

diffusion of “audit culture” (Strathern 2000) are closely related to the widespread trust in numbers that appear to be “objective” and “transparent” measures. Theodore Porter, in his *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (1995), argues that such trust in numbers took root in the western world as early as the late 19th century and is closely related to distrust of experts’ “local knowledge”. In fact, if unquantifiable expert judgments are replaced by seemingly objective and transparent numerical information, non-specialists may be able to make public sector agencies more accountable for their performances.

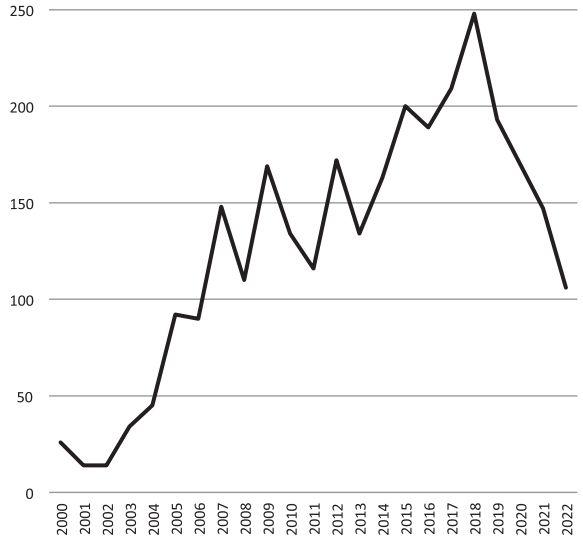
Therefore, it appears that such trust in numbers, coupled with distrust of professionals, underlies the longevity of KPI in Japan’s public discourse on higher education policies: there is widespread distrust of higher education institutions in Japan.

Ⅳ Two-Tiered Structure Underlying Fads and Longevity

While there appear to be different reasons behind the longevity of PDCA and KPI, we also highlight a certain similarity regarding the basic structure that may explain both the short-lived fads and relative longevity of certain management ideas. The structure is two-tiered and consists of a buzzword level and a deeper belief level. Almost by definition, management-related terms at the buzzword level will come and go after one and another at relatively short intervals. On the other hand, beliefs at a deeper level will persist much longer.

For example, PDCA is essentially one of the management buzzwords that has a limited “product life.” Indeed, although it has a relatively long life, there are signs that its sell-by-date is about to expire, as shown in Fig. 7.

Fig. 7 PDCA-related Publications: 2000-2022



Source: Created by the Author based on NDL Search (https://iss.ndl.go.jp/books?any＝PDCA&op_id＝1)

This figure shows the changes in the number of Japanese publications addressing PDCA according to the database of the National Dietary Library Search. While the number of publications peaked in 2018, there were significant drops afterwards. It seems that PDCA is falling out of favor both as a management cycle and as a policy cycle idea.[11] As a consequence, PDCA may eventually become obsolete. On the other hand, the belief in the tidy and rational management process, especially when it is represented in the form of idealized cyclical image, appears to die hard. In fact, as explained above, the origin of cyclical management cycle can be traced to the 1940s, when Alvin Brown presented the idea of PDS cycle. Therefore, the concept of PDCA becomes obsolete, it will be replaced by another buzzword and a related cyclical representation in the near future.

Similar things can be said of KPI. In this case, AKPI, BKPI, CKPI are clearly buzzword level terms that will come and go and become eventually obsolete. However, trust in numbers or belief in the objectivity and transparency of numerical performance information had its roots already in the late 19th century. The trust has been coupled with distrust of expert judgments. One can even say that the NPM and audit explosion are nothing but the tips of the iceberg of the combination of the trust and distrust. Therefore, even if specific terms such as KPI come and go, the basic belief in numerical performance indicators is here to stay, and

11 It should be noted that there is also a possibility that the decline in the number of PDCA-related publications was caused by the institutionalization of the concept: the number may have declined chiefly because PDCA has become taken for granted.

some other business buzzwords related to numerical indicators will emerge and replace KPI and its presently widely used variants.

Concluding Remarks: The Triunity of PDIF, KPPI, and PBEM

We may be able to draw several lessons from the cases of PDCA and KPI. The first, relating to PDCA, concerns the simplistic graphical representation that is often combined not only with PDCA but also with various other management ideas. Whereas the seemingly easy-to-understand image of PDCA as a cyclical (or spiraling) process leading to perpetual improvement has certainly been one of the appeals of the idea, it entails a risk of diverting our attention from the actual workings of management or policy processes. This leads to the second lesson regarding the necessity of acknowledging the reality of management or policy process: we should be more realistic and admit the inherent messiness of any management or policy process and not deal it as a yardstick to see what is actually happening and how to adjust it (Cf. Cairney 2016: 18). This is the third lesson that we should learn from the case of PDCA.

We can also draw a number of lessons from the case of KPI. First, we should be more careful in meeting the demands of accountability. Although professionals and experts should focus more on ensuring that they are accountable to the public, an overreliance on numerical indicators for the accountability involves great risk. The negative consequences of university rankings clearly illustrate the significant danger resulting from reliance on seemingly transparent yet deeply problematic metrics (Tamanaha 2012; Hazelkorn 2015; Muller 2018: Ch.7). Thus we should distance ourselves from the unreasonable demands of accountability through oversimplified numerical indicators and instead propose alternative means of making ourselves accountable to the public.

As a second lesson, we ought to finetune the metrics to specific situations, such as specific conditions of various academic disciplines. Otherwise, excessively standardized metrics will become a sort of “Procrustean bed.” For example, in the case of AKPI, the target figure of external funding was set to 15 million yen annually for each faculty member.[12] While this might be a relatively easy goal to attain for certain faculty members belonging to science and technology departments, it is an almost impossible target for most faculty members in the humanities and social sciences departments. In fact, such an overambitious target will

12 In one of the few English sources on AKPI, the target figure was erroneously said to be “1.5 million yen” instead of 15 million yen (Aida and Watanabe 2016: 4).

discourage rather than encourage faculty members to improve their performance in research and education.

The third lesson pertains to so-called “Goodhart’s law,” which is usually summarized as “When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure” (Goodhart 1975). In Japan’s higher education reform, instead of using KPIs as measures to gauge the achievements of policy goals, their use itself has been emphasized. In other words, the use of KPI ended up becoming a target. This is obviously a means-end reversal, wherein the tail (the use of performance indicator as a target) wags the dog (reforms), not the dog wags its tail.

Most of the lessons that can be learned from the cases of PDCA and KPI may sound commonsensical or even feel like a sort of truism. In view of this, it is strange that the lessons have not been applied in earnest to Japan’s higher education reform. In fact, as we have seen in this essay, government agencies and accreditation associations have continued to use the two terms and related ideas in their reform policies despite their limited utilities and the obvious failures of the policy programs employing the terms and related ideas.

It is quite ironic that both the ideas of PDCA and KPI include learning from failure as an essential requirement. In the case of PDCA, C(heck) is supposed to include sincere reflections on the eventual failures and successes of the P(lan). Similarly, any KPI should provide important information to gauge the achievements of the plan or policy, including its overall success or failure. It should also be noted that EBPM is supposed to be closely related to such (genuine) PDCA and KPI, as shown in Fig. 3.

After all, lessons can serve as lessons only for those who are ready and willing to learn from failures as well as from successes. It appears that MEXT and other government agencies’ failure to learn from failure can be explained, at least partly, in terms of the asymmetrical relationship between upward and downward accountabilities (Burke 2005; see also Power 1994: 13-14; Sato 2013: 48-50): while HEIs are held accountable for their performances, those agencies overseeing the performances (e.g., accreditation association, MEXT, JSPS) are seldom, if ever, held accountable or responsible for their own performances.

A typical example of such asymmetry is the treatment of the SGU program’s disappointing results in the assessment report by JSPS, which is under the jurisdiction of MEXT. Because one of the most important targets of the grants program was boosting the positions of Japanese universities in the world university rankings, policymakers in charge of the program should have candidly and honestly admitted the program’s obvious failure and accounted for its possible causes. However, as mentioned previously, the JSPS assessment report did not pay even cursory attention to the disappointing rankings. In other words, they appear to ignore the

most important KPI in their assessment (C in the PDCA cycle) of their policy that should have been firmly based on the spirit of EBPM.

If those responsible for PDCA or any kind of policy cycle failed to include the process of learning from failure, the policy cycle can be characterized not as an effective management cycle but as a *mis*management cycle, which I would label PDIF or "Plan, Do, Ignore, Forget." And when the PDIF is combined with faulty and vacuous KPIs or KPPIs (Key Pseudo Performance Indicators), PBEM (Policy-Based Evidence Making) instead of EBPM will result.

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